A REVIEW OF BRITISH BUTTERFLIES IN 1984

By Dr. C. J. LUCKENS*

Three good butterfly seasons in a row are most unusual in these troublous times, and 1984 was an exceptional year for many species. Most butterflies showed gains, but there were a few unexpected declines also. Weather patterns were unusual, to say the least. In the south a cold March suddenly flowered into a dry sunny April. The eastern counties remained cold and less favourable at this time, but throughout the rest of southern and western England there were very early emergences and unprecedented numbers of spring butterflies. May and early June were both a little disappointing but after June 5th the weather remained generally very good until the end of the summer. The northern half of Britain shared in this excellent weather and Scotland had its driest warmest summer for several decades.

The glorious April weather in southern England brought out most of the hibernators in good numbers (especially *Gonepteryx rhamni*) but *Polygonia C-album* L. was rather scarcer than usual. By mid April *Anthocharis cardamines* L. and *Celestrina argiolus* L. started to emerge and thereafter produced exeptional numbers throughout their range. There were also good numbers of *Pararge aegeria* L. at this time in our south Hampshire garden, but elsewhere, in the south at least, reports seemed to indicate that it was scarcer than usual in the spring broods. Average numbers appeared in the summer broods, though none were recorded from the usual sites in Easter Ross. In coastal Argyll I saw several single examples in Appin, Benderloch and along the north shore of Loch Etive.

Lasiommata megera L. also produced a small first brood in most areas and a somewhat better summer brood. In west Sussex this seemed confined mainly to downland sites. *Megera* appears to be continuing its spread in Northumberland, where in the 1970's it was scarce, and is now widespread and numerous along the Tyne valley and spreading west and north year by year. Another scarce Satyrid in the north-eastern Highlands this year was *Erebia aethiops* Esp, and this after abundance during the three previous seasons. We found this butterfly widespread and common in central Argyll, however, with heavy concentrations in some sites in Appin, Benderloch and on the Isle of Seil. *Maniola jurtina* L. had another good year. It did better at Portland than for several past seasons, and was recorded as abundant (but slightly down in numbers from 1983) in north Dorset. In Scotland it had an extended season and one was recorded on Buddleia at Muir of Ord on 20th/21st August. It was fairly common throughout Easter and Wester Ross,

*Swallowfield, Manor Road, Durley, Southampton, SO3 2AF.

and I recorded a few worn specimens flying on the Isle of Seil, Argyll, on August 18th.

Pyronia tithonus L. appeared in enormous numbers in this area of south Hampshire and this seems to have been reflected throughout its range in the south.

Melanargia galathea L. also had a very good season generally, though numbers were again rather low in some of its former strongholds in west Sussex. Another success story concerned *Hipparchia semele* L. Portland produced a very good showing of this butterfly with several of the usual vars taken with obsolete or reduced spotting. It was also recorded in several sites not previously noted in North Dorest and was not uncommon near Corfe Castle. The New Forest heathland produced smaller numbers than usual, but in one of its normally sparse colonies on the east Sussex Downs near Alfriston, 60 were recorded in one day. New localities for the Grayling were found at Gruinard Bay in Wester Ross (at an early date for this species in Scotland – July 2nd) and we recorded one or two specimens on the north shore of Loch Etive, Argyll during late August. Numbers of *Aphantopus hyperantus* L. were reported as average in north Dorset and down in some areas of Hampshire but it was encouraging to hear of an increase in the New Forest after several seasons of scarcity. It also appeared abundantly near Cressage in Shropshire. Tim Melling, who worked extensively on *Coenonympha tullia* Mull. in 1984, sent a useful report of his activities and the welcome news that one Northumberland colony was estimated at well over 1,000 specimens on July 7th. Seventy different bogland localities were detected in the county in that year. On Thorne Waste in Yorkshire he was able to find 60 larvae in May within a 100-yard square. In spite of major fires at Whixall Moss, Shropshire early in the year, *tullia* also had a reasonable season there.

An interesting report regarding *Eurodryas aurinia* Rott. came from Wiltshire where larvae were found in late April near Tilshead, feeding naturally on *Dipsacus*, wild teazle. It appears to have been an excellent year for this local species in both south Wiltshire and north Dorset – especially at Hod Hill and Bratton Castle. The isolated Worcester colony had a real population explosion. Here the first *aurinia* was seen on May 14th, and by June 7th the butterfly was in its thousands. There was some evidence of spread to neighbouring areas also. This was not the earliest emergence date however, as it was seen near Street in Somerset on May 13th, and in this same county the butterfly continued for nearly a month, as several were recorded at Charterhouse on June 10th. Several records also appeared from the woods on the Surrey/Sussex border. There was a single record from Sedgehurst Wood and large numbers were noted at Botany Bay near Chiddingfold. I visited this latter site

in mid-August and found larval webs in prodigious numbers along a fifty yard stretch of woodland ride. It would be very interesting to know if this is the result of introduction or of natural colonisation. There were also excellent numbers of larval webs in nearly all the Argyllshire stations in August. Some new colonies also turned up and I was glad to find a strong extensive population on a headland near Benderloch.

Clossiana euphrosyne L. and *Clossiana selene* D. & S. unfortunately continued to suffer from the "bushing out" of their woodland habitats. Both are now rarities in Sussex apart from the colonies on the Surrey border. Reasonable numbers appeared in Wyre Forest however (especially *selene*) and *euphrosyne* had a good showing in some of the Lake District sites. *Melitaea cinxia* L. was reported in numbers from the Isle of Wight and appears to be spreading along the south coast from its strongholds around Compton Bay and St. Catherine's Point. An interesting report from the Channel Islands revealed that this butterfly was abundant on Alderney and the south coast of Guernsey in 1984. It was pleasing to hear that good numbers of *Mellicta athalia* Rott. were seen on the Cornwall/Devon border between June 21st and 23rd, and that the Exmoor colonies were also in very good shape – the emergence there commencing in early June. *Argynnis aglaia* L. appeared in small numbers in north Dorset, but there were increased sightings in the Channel Islands especially on Sark and Jethou, and a definite record from Guernsey.

The high brown fritillary, *Argynnis adippe*, D. & S. continued to cause concern, though slightly better numbers were reported from the Malvern area (with a first sighting around June 20th), and it appeared in good numbers in the scattered limestone woodland in the Witherslack hills. An average season was the consensus for *Argynnis paphia* L., though there appeared to be a slight gain in the west Sussex woods and evidence of spread into a wooded area near Highley, Shropshire. The dark *valezina* form was not uncommon in some areas of north Dorset but fewer than usual were seen in the Winchester woods. In some areas of the New Forest *paphia* did fairly well but the main emergence did not occur until mid-July. At this stage *Limenitis camilla* L. was also seen in some numbers in the New Forest. In fact the White Admiral seems to have had an excellent season from Shropshire to the south coast. It was reported to be spreading north to woodland in south Staffordshire and Worcestershire and was also found in Haugh Wood, Hereford. The 1899 Malvern Catalogue records *camilla* as 'very rare', but the butterfly is now fairly common around the Malvern Hills with a sprinkling in Wyre Forest.

For *Apatura iris* L. 1984 was an exceptional year. From my own observations in south Hampshire and Wiltshire it was the best since 1976. A casual search of sallows in one Hampshire wood at

the end of July revealed 9 ova in just under an hour. Reports from west Sussex and Surrey were slightly less encouraging however, though it was recorded as "quite common" in one or two localities. *Aglais urticae* L. also had a remarkable year throughout most of the country. In south Wiltshire and Dorset adults were common all through the year, with many nettle patches completely defoliated in August, and a large third brood was produced. Good numbers of *urticae* were seen in the northern Highlands between 19th March and 29th May, and again between 4th July to the 15th October. We saw many imagines in Argyll in late August (usually feeding on Scabious flowers) and a large late brood of full fed larvae was noted on the Isle of Seil during this time. *Polygonia C-album* on the other hand seemed to have rather a lean year, but it was interesting to learn that it had returned as a breeding species to Guernsey after being last recorded in 1947. *Nymphalis io* L. appeared in good numbers in April, and the summer hatch in most areas was excellent, appearing as early as July 10th. There were also several records of the rare *Nymphalis polychloros* L. Some of these may have been the result of released specimens but there was definite evidence of persistent colonies in Somerset. The fine April weather brought out *Hamearis lucina* L. as early as April 25th in Hampshire, and in the Witherslack colonies (which normally emerge later), the Duke of Burgundy was first seen on May 7th. Most colonies of this local butterfly appeared to be holding their own in 1984, reports being received from downland sites in Sussex, west to Hawkesbury in Somerset and north to Witherslack.

The main reason for decline of *Plebejus argus* L. nowadays seems to be destruction of habitat, but in its remaining colonies this butterfly seemed to do quite well. It was late in emergence at Portland, but reasonable numbers were seen, and on Ashdown Forest it also had a good year. The isolated heathland locality at Chailey, Sussex also produced good numbers but it appears to have been scarcer than usual on the New Forest heaths. There is an isolated, fragile locality in Shropshire, and here, also, it was recorded in some plenty. In spite of the 'post 1970' dots on the distribution maps for the Channel Islands the last record was apparently from Jethou in the 1960's. T.N.D. Peet has searched for it over the last 5 years without success on Guernsey where it formerly occurred on the light soils in the north of the island.

Aricia agestis D. & S. showed something of an increase in 1984 in north Dorset but populations in west Sussex were in general very low. It was reported as very common on one site near Brighton however. Moderately good numbers were noted at St. Catherine's Down near Winchester. *Aricia artaxerxes* was detected commonly in several inland sites in Berwickshire. *Cupido minimus* Fuess. fared less well in this area of Hampshire in

1984. I failed to see a single specimen at St. Catherine's Down and numbers were hardly up to scratch on Portsdown. There was an early record on May 13th for Frome in Somerset, and it was recorded in fair numbers, locally, in the Cotswolds near Stroud and Painswick.

At Portland, *Lysandra coridon* Poda. was common (about the same numbers as 1983) and the usual vars turned up such as *fowleri* and *marginata*. *Obsoleta* forms were less common than usual however and there were no really striking aberrations. *Coridon* appeared sparsely in north Dorset and Wiltshire, but some of the localities near Cheddar in Somerset produced good numbers. Most other areas had an average year with an extended season to the end of September. Very small numbers in the first brood of *Lysandra bellargus* Rott. were reported from most localities where this local insect survives. None were seen at Martin Down, for example, on June 15th, and the spring brood in Sussex was described as very poor. Late summer broods were generally up to strength throughout however (including Martin) and one or two new colonies were discovered in Sussex.

In its double brooded range *Polyommatus icarus* Rott. shared a similar pattern to *bellargus*. There was a somewhat sparse first brood followed by a very good summer brood. In northern Scotland it was found commonly between mid-June and mid-July in Rosshire and northwest Sutherland, especially in coastal localities. The early spring hatch of *argiolus* was common in nearly all areas. As far north as Witherslack over 25 were seen by one recorder in a quarter-mile walk on April 27th (some holly trees were tapped in order to produce this excellent score for the north). There was a correspondingly large summer brood (in the south at least) and this delightful butterfly was recorded as abundant in Dorset, Somerset and Hampshire. Heavy parasitism of the resulting larvae were noted in west Sussex.

The small copper, *Lycaena phlaeas* L. produced at least 3 broods in most areas, the 3rd being particularly numerous in north Dorset, Wiltshire and Hampshire. A possible 4th brood was noted at Lewes in Sussex. I found *phlaeas* ubiquitous in coastal Argyll in mid to late August. *Callophrys rubi* L. on the other hand, was generally rather scarce in 1984. It was recorded from Torridon, Wester Ross on May 11th and 15th, and it was seen in hundreds in Northumberland along the Tyne valley on May 2nd. The females here were noted depositing ova in the buds of bilberry. This butterfly had a very early emergence due to the warm April, and J. E. Green suggests the possibility of a 2nd brood, since one or two were seen in mid to late August in his area of the west Midlands. After the super-abundance of *Thecla quercus* L. in 1983 the purple hairstreak appeared in much lower numbers in 1984. This was certainly the case in most of the strong Hampshire colonies and the same disappointing reports came from Wiltshire and Shropshire.

On the other hand several new Hampshire colonies were detected of *Strymonidia w-album* Knoch and it was reported as hanging on in small numbers in several Shropshire and Breconshire colonies and recorded in small numbers from near Bath, Somerset. In Worcestershire it was discovered breeding on common elm saplings and was recorded commonly at one site near Hereford. At its only known site in the west Midlands in Worcestershire, good numbers of *Thecla betulae* L. eggs were seen and in the blackthorn-lined lanes north of Oxford, T. Bernhard and I recorded around 100 ova during a few hours' search of the hedgerows. In Sussex a few new sites were found but numbers were reportedly low in many of the localities.

Anthocharis cardamines L. had an excellent year nearly everywhere; in the Black Isle, Rosshire, 20 were seen at Rosemarkie on May 14th where it was first recorded in 1973. It has also been noted in west Lancashire for the first time in the last two years. *Pieris brassicae* L. and *Pieris napi* L. on the other hand were rather scarce in southern England, and the latter unusually so in the Highlands. The brimstone had a remarkable year throughout its range. It was abundant here in April and over the six miles of country road between my home and Southampton, where I would normally expect to see perhaps half a dozen, I counted no less than 18 on April 9th. The fragile, weak-flying *Leptidea sinapis* L., though fairly common on the south Devon undercliff east of Sidmouth, appeared to be contracting its range in the west Midlands and produced low numbers on the Sussex/Surrey border. I did see one or two second brood specimens while inspecting the *aurinia* colony near Chiddingfold, but in general *sinapis* did not seem to do well in 1984. *Carterocephalus palaemon* Pall also was reported as slightly lower in Argyll but *Ochlodes venatus* Br. & Grey continue to increase its numbers in the Tyne valley and appeared to be spreading its range northwards. *Pyrgus malvae* L., though generally scarce in 1984 was seen near Droitwich, Shropshire on July 31st – possibly a second brood specimen. Along with the small fritillaries, *euphrosyne* and *selene*, the two skippers *Pyrgus malvae* and *Erynnis tages* L. appear to be suffering from the lack of suitable coppice woodland. This, unfortunately, must be one of the more difficult habitats to maintain artificially over a large enough area in the few woodland nature reserves that exist in southern England.

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